

NOT FOR PUBLICATION

**UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT
DISTRICT OF NEW JERSEY**

DONNIE WALTON,	:	
	:	
Plaintiff,	:	Civil Action No. 14-2137 (ES)
	:	
v.	:	OPINION
	:	
OFFICER JOHN KELLY, et al.,	:	
	:	
Defendants.	:	

SALAS, District Judge

Plaintiff Donnie Walton (“Plaintiff”), incarcerated at Passaic County Jail in Paterson, New Jersey at the time of filing, seeks to bring this action *in forma pauperis*. Based on his affidavit of indigence, the Court will GRANT Plaintiff’s application to proceed *in forma pauperis* pursuant to 28 U.S.C. § 1915(a) and order the Clerk of the Court to file the complaint.

At this time, the Court must review the complaint, pursuant to 28 U.S.C. §§ 1915(e)(2) and 1915A, to determine whether it should be dismissed as frivolous or malicious, for failure to state a claim upon which relief may be granted, or because it seeks monetary relief from a defendant who is immune from such relief. For the reasons set forth below, the Court concludes that the complaint should be DISMISSED.

I. BACKGROUND

Plaintiff brings this civil rights action, pursuant to 42 U.S.C. § 1983, against Defendants Officers John Kelly; L. Fermin; Roberto Mercado; Sheff; Spencer Finch; and Lazu, as well as the Paterson Police Department; City of Paterson; and the Chief of the Paterson Police Department.

The following factual allegations are taken from the complaint, and are accepted for purposes of this screening only. The Court has made no findings as to the veracity of Plaintiff's allegations.

Against all the officer defendants, Plaintiff alleges that they used excessive force during the course of his arrest on November 26, 2011. Plaintiff alleges, among other things, that the officer defendants "kicked, punched [and] beat" Plaintiff with a foreign object, while he was handcuffed. (Compl. ¶ 6). Plaintiff alleges that he suffered a broken nose, fractured facial bone, broken teeth, fractured right eye orbit, impaired vision, multiple head injuries and a permanent forehead scar. (*Id.*). Plaintiff alleges that the Police Department employs these officers and the Police Chief failed to ensure that the officers had proper training. (*Id.* at ¶ 4(h)-(i)). Plaintiff is seeking injunctive and monetary relief. (*Id.* ¶ 7).

II. DISCUSSION

A. Legal Standard

1. Standard for a *Sua Sponte* Dismissal

Per the Prison Litigation Reform Act, Pub. L. No. 104-134, §§ 801-810, 110 Stat. 1321-66 to 1321-77 (April 26, 1996) ("PLRA"), district courts must review complaints in those civil actions in which a prisoner is proceeding *in forma pauperis*, *see* 28 U.S.C. § 1915(e)(2)(B), seeks redress against a governmental employee or entity, *see* 28 U.S.C. § 1915A(b), or brings a claim with respect to prison conditions, *see* 28 U.S.C. § 1997e. The PLRA directs district courts to *sua sponte* dismiss any claim that is frivolous, is malicious, fails to state a claim upon which relief may be granted, or seeks monetary relief from a defendant who is immune from such relief. The instant action is subject to *sua sponte* screening for dismissal under 28 U.S.C. §§ 1915(e)(2)(B) and 1915A because Plaintiff is proceeding as an indigent and is a prisoner.

According to the Supreme Court's decision in *Ashcroft v. Iqbal*, "a pleading that offers 'labels or conclusions' or 'a formulaic recitation of the elements of a cause of action will not do.'" 556 U.S. 662, 678 (2009) (quoting *Bell Atlantic Corp. v. Twombly*, 550 U.S. 544, 555 (2007)). To survive *sua sponte* screening for failure to state a claim¹, the complaint must allege "sufficient factual matter" to show that the claim is facially plausible. *Fowler v. UPMS Shadyside*, 578 F.3d 203, 210 (3d Cir. 2009) (citation omitted). "A claim has facial plausibility when the plaintiff pleads factual content that allows the court to draw the reasonable inference that the defendant is liable for the misconduct alleged." *Belmont v. MB Inv. Partners, Inc.*, 708 F.3d 470, 483 n.17 (3d Cir. 2012) (quoting *Iqbal*, 556 U.S. at 678). Moreover, while *pro se* pleadings are liberally construed, "*pro se* litigants still must allege sufficient facts in their complaints to support a claim." *Mala v. Crown Bay Marina, Inc.*, 704 F.3d 239, 245 (3d Cir. 2013) (citation omitted) (emphasis added).

2. Section 1983 Actions

A plaintiff may have a cause of action under 42 U.S.C. § 1983 for certain violations of his constitutional rights. Section 1983 provides in relevant part:

Every person who, under color of any statute, ordinance, regulation, custom, or usage, of any State or Territory ... subjects, or causes to be subjected, any citizen of the United States or other person within the jurisdiction thereof to the deprivation of any rights, privileges, or immunities secured by the Constitution and laws, shall be liable to the party injured in an action at law, suit in equity, or other proper proceeding for redress....

¹ "The legal standard for dismissing a complaint for failure to state a claim pursuant to 28 U.S.C. § 1915(e)(2)(B)(ii) is the same as that for dismissing a complaint pursuant to Federal Rule of Civil Procedure 12(b)(6)." *Schreane v. Seana*, 506 F. App'x 120, 122 (3d Cir. 2012) (citing *Allah v. Seiverling*, 229 F.3d 220, 223 (3d Cir. 2000)); *Mitchell v. Beard*, 492 F. App'x 230, 232 (3d Cir. 2012) (discussing 28 U.S.C. § 1997e(c)(1)); *Courteau v. United States*, 287 F. App'x 159, 162 (3d Cir. 2008) (discussing 28 U.S.C. § 1915A(b)).

Thus, to state a claim for relief under § 1983, a plaintiff must allege, first, the violation of a right secured by the Constitution or laws of the United States and, second, that the alleged deprivation was committed or caused by a person acting under color of state law. *See West v. Atkins*, 487 U.S. 42, 48 (1988); *Malleus v. George*, 641 F.3d 560, 563 (3d Cir. 2011).

B. Analysis

Plaintiff appears to be asserting a Fourth Amendment claim for excessive force during the course of arrest. But, based on the facts as alleged, the Court finds that the complaint is time-barred.

Although the statute of limitations is an affirmative defense which may be waived by the defendant, it is appropriate to dismiss *sua sponte*, under 28 U.S.C. § 1915(e)(2), a *pro se* civil rights claim whose untimeliness is apparent from the face of the Complaint. *See, e.g., Jones v. Bock*, 549 U.S. 199, 214-15 (2007) (if the allegations of a complaint, “for example, show that relief is barred by the applicable statute of limitations, the complaint is subject to dismissal for failure to state a claim”).

Civil rights claims are best characterized as personal injury actions and are governed by the applicable state’s general or residual statute of limitations for such actions. *See Owens v. Okure*, 488 U.S. 235 (1989) (cited in *Wallace v. Kato*, 549 U.S. 384, 387 (2007); *Wilson v. Garcia*, 471 U.S. 261, 280 (1985) (same). Accordingly, New Jersey’s two-year limitations period on personal injury actions, N.J. Stat. Ann. § 2A:14-2, governs Plaintiff’s claims. *See Dique v. New Jersey State Police*, 603 F.3d 181, 185 (3d Cir. 2010) (citing *Montgomery v. DeSimone*, 159 F.3d 120, 126 & n. 4 (3d Cir. 1998) and *Cito v. Bridgewater Twp. Police Dep’t*, 892 F.2d 23, 25 (3d Cir. 1989)). Under N.J. Stat. Ann. § 2A:14-2, an action for an injury to the person caused by a

wrongful act, neglect, or default must be commenced within two years of accrual of the cause of action. *Cito*, 892 F.2d at 25; *accord Brown v. Foley*, 810 F.2d 55, 56 (3d Cir. 1987).

“[T]he accrual date of a § 1983 cause of action is a question of federal law that is not resolved by reference to state law.” *Wallace*, 549 U.S. at 388. A claim accrues as soon as the injured party “knew or had reason to know of the injury that constitutes the basis of his action.” *Sandutch v. Murosaki*, 684 F.2d 252, 254 (3d Cir. 1982); *see also Oshiver v. Levin, Fishbein, Sedran & Berman*, 38 F.3d 1380, 1385 (3d Cir. 1994). “Plaintiff’s actual knowledge is irrelevant. Rather, the question is whether the knowledge was known, or through reasonable diligence, knowable. Moreover, the claim accrues upon knowledge of the actual injury, not that the injury constitutes a legal wrong.” *Fassnacht v. United States*, 1996 WL 41621, at *2 (E.D. Pa. Feb. 2, 1996) (citing *Oshiver*, 38 F.3d at 1386). Claims for excessive force typically accrue on the date of the assault, because, at that point, the plaintiff has reason to know of the injury. *See Ostuni v. Wa Wa’s Mart*, 532 F. App’x 110, 112 (3d Cir. 2013) (citing *Montgomery v. De Simone*, 159 F.3d 120, 126 (3d Cir. 1998)).

Unless their full application would defeat the goals of the federal statute at issue, courts should not unravel states’ interrelated limitations provisions regarding tolling, revival, and questions of application. *Wilson*, 471 U.S. at 269. New Jersey statutes set forth certain bases for “statutory tolling.” *See, e.g.*, N.J.S.A. § 2A:14-21 (detailing tolling because of minority or insanity); N.J.S.A. § 2A:14-22 (detailing tolling because of nonresidency of persons liable). New Jersey law permits “equitable tolling” where “the complainant has been induced or tricked by his adversary’s misconduct into allowing the filing deadline to pass,” or where a plaintiff has “in some extraordinary way” been prevented from asserting his rights, or where a plaintiff has timely

asserted his rights mistakenly by either defective pleading or in the wrong forum. *See Freeman v. State*, 788 A.2d 867, 879-80 (N.J. Super. Ct. App. Div. 2002) (citations omitted). “However, absent a showing of intentional inducement or trickery by a defendant, the doctrine of equitable tolling should be applied sparingly and only in the rare situation where it is demanded by sound legal principles as well as the interests of justice.” *Id.* at 880.

When state tolling rules contradict federal law or policy, in certain limited circumstances, federal courts can turn to federal tolling doctrine. *See Lake v. Arnold*, 232 F.3d 360, 370 (3d Cir. 2000). Under federal law, equitable tolling is appropriate in three general scenarios:

(1) where a defendant actively misleads a plaintiff with respect to her cause of action; (2) where the plaintiff has been prevented from asserting her claim as a result of other extraordinary circumstances; or (3) where the plaintiff asserts her claims in a timely manner but has done so in the wrong forum.

Id. n. 9.

Based on these statute of limitations principles, Plaintiff’s complaint is time-barred. Here, according to the allegations of his Complaint, Plaintiff was aware of the officers’ use of excessive force on November 26, 2011. Therefore, Plaintiff’s December 24, 2013 complaint was filed—approximately one month after the limitations period expired in November 2013. (*See Compl. At 6*). Moreover, Plaintiff has failed to allege any facts suggesting a basis for tolling under N.J.S.A. § 2A:14-21, 2A:14-2, or any other equitable ground. Accordingly, the complaint will be dismissed as untimely.

III. CONCLUSION

For the reasons set forth above, the Complaint will be dismissed without prejudice in its entirety for failure to state a claim pursuant to 28 U.S.C. § 1915(e)(2)(B) and § 1915A (b)(1). However, because it is conceivable that Plaintiff may be able to supplement his pleading with facts

sufficient to overcome the deficiencies noted herein, the Court will grant Plaintiff leave to move to re-open this case and to file an amended complaint.² An appropriate order follows.

/s/ Esther Salas
Esther Salas, U.S.D.J.

² Plaintiff should note that when an amended complaint is filed, the original complaint no longer performs any function in the case and “cannot be utilized to cure defects in the amended [complaint], unless the relevant portion is specifically incorporated in the new [complaint].” 6 Wright, Miller & Kane, *Federal Practice and Procedure* § 1476 (2d ed. 1990) (footnotes omitted). An amended complaint may adopt some or all of the allegations in the original complaint, but the identification of the particular allegations to be adopted must be clear and explicit. *Id.* To avoid confusion, the safer course is to file an amended complaint that is complete in itself. *Id.*